

RED AMBER—Another Fascinating Story of the H. Bedford-Jones Series

ONLY a few miles out of the ancient imperial city of Cheng-tu, Haney passed his rival and very good enemy, Benson.

Haney chuckled as his yellow bearers swept along with his chair, and he recognized Benson in the chair ahead. Benson's carriers were not hurrying particularly.

"He's been bullying the boys, has he?" thought Haney. "Then I'll beat him to it easily." As the two chairs came along side, Haney leaned forward and spoke. "Hello, Mr. Benson! Going up to the Lao-tzu Temple, are you? Pleasant trip."

Benson, who was always deadly smooth and who never lost his head, looked at Haney with a viperish intensity.

"The same to you!" he retorted calmly, yet the words held a deep fierceness. Haney only grinned and waved his hand as his chair went into the lead. He knew that Benson would dare shoot him in the back—before witnesses.

At the edge of the mountains which girdle the historic plain of Cheng-tu no three sides by the Lao-tzu-miao, a temple dedicated to Lao-tzu, founder of Taoism. Somewhere in the vicinity of this temple lived a man named Tung Ho, who had in his possession a red amber, taken from the tomb of the Emperor Ling Ti of the eastern Han dynasty. Haney knew little about it all, except from verbal information. Whether the amber was carved or whether Tung Ho would sell it he did not know.

Learning that Benson was setting forth rather secretly, Haney had engaged bearers and started. It was enough that Benson was going, for anything Benson went after in person was bound to be unusual.

So scarce are the things of ancient days now become in China, so keen is the rivalry among dealers and agents, that choice things are noted down from afar and native collectors and their collections are listed and known intimately. Haney had the impression that this Tung Ho was no collector, but some hillman who would not know the value of the red amber. He knew, too, that he might be walking into some trap set by Benson—the enmity between the two men would cease only with death, but this possibility did not worry Haney. It was enough for him that Benson was also on the trail.

It was the end of the afternoon when Haney came to the temple. This was not one of the splendid and wealthy Buddhist shrines which abound through the mountains, but a Taoist edifice built during the Sung period. It was, of course, walled and nearby had grown up a village of respectable portions.

Haney observed that a temple fair was in progress—a fête or celebration to which all the mountain folk had gathered, bringing goods for barter or sale. There were many peddlers also in and about the village.

Haney went direct to the temple. He had no baggage. Pistol, pipe and tobacco and a large amount of money were enough to carry him anywhere. Paying off his bearers and bidding them wait in the village until the morrow, he entered the temple. He found himself greeted with the usual courtesy, and one of the many guest rooms was assigned him.

His first inquiry was for Tung Ho. The priests informed him that Tung Ho lived alone with a brother, Tung Tzu, three miles distant in the hills. It was now too late to go there and return before dark, hence no guides could be obtained, for fear of tigers. The mountain folk stick close to home after nightfall. Haney perceived also from the manner of his informant that he would be unwise to try this trip alone. He concluded, rightly, that the two brothers did not have the best of reputations, and reluctantly decided to wait until morning.

"Since I've beaten Benson to it, I might as well have the pickings of the fair," he reflected.

Hastily cleaning up, he sauntered forth. To his gratification he was able to pick up a number of small objects—nothing of any great importance—and he then turned his attention to a small canvas booth outside the temple wall, where some sort of mountebank was holding forth. Haney was attracted to it by the giggles and squeals of light from the crowd around the booth.

He found the entertainment nothing wonderful. A peddler, evidently a wandering Korean, sat and begged for money. His display consisted of a thin glass case, closed with wire at the ends, in which were a number of small birds. The man wheezed at a mouth-organ, talking between whiles.

"All the years of my life I have spent training these birds," whined the dirty Korean. "Now, see, when I play they will dance."

Sure enough, when the music began, the birds began to dance. He was, since the thin glass case was not high enough to let them fly. The crowd shrieked in ecstasy.

Haney's eyes grew a bit more steely. He noted the mouth-organ and saw that it was of Japanese make. He had little doubt that the Korean was one of the many peddlers who were distributing morphia throughout the country under Japanese auspices.

Being red-headed, he was impulsive. Being an American, he detested needless cruelty to dumb things. He shouldered his way to the front of the crowd and without a word of explanation produced his automatic pistol and with it smashed the thin glass case of the case. The tortured birds fluttered forth and took wing.

With a startled oath, the Korean leaped up, a knife flashing into his hand. Haney took him by the neck and dragged him forward across the booth.

"Listen, span of a turtle!" the American's voice boomed. "I'll murder you and all your kind if you make the wrong move with that knife, you die! Drop it! I say drop it!"

The knife fell. Haney kicked aside the front of the booth. He exposed a burning candle, ordered by the showman could move the candle close to the tin floor of the case or move it away.

"Begone, child of a blind fish!" said Haney scornfully.

He peddler vanished, pursued by hoots and jeers and not a few stones. The Chinese do not like Koreans, any way.

It was nearly dark when Benson arrived. Haney saw nothing of him, but heard his voice as he was being shown in to quarters.

After an excellent supper, Haney

left the temple precincts for a walk and a smoke. He did not fancy the look of his hosts. They were a debauched and sensual lot, and few of them had the skull scars of genuine priests—the scars left by the burning pastilles at initiation.

Returning to the outer gateway, Haney paused to clean his pipe and glance at the temple grounds, sprinkled with lanterns. The night was dark and close, with storm threatening. Despite the utter peace of the mountain night, the stillness of the scene, Haney was by no means off guard. When presently he observed a silent figure slipping to him along the wall, his hand slid abruptly under his left arm. Instant response to the gesture came in a low voice speaking fluent mandarin:

"Heavenborn, be careful with that weapon! I have come to speak with you."

"Hello! The Korean again!" thought Haney, and kept his hand on his pistol. "You accused devil, what do you want with me? Trying to stab me in the darkness?"

"Not at all, excellency!" murmured the Korean in an aggrieved tone. "That was a very clever trick you played upon me this afternoon, but I bear no malice."

Haney half expected a knife to leap forth as the man came close, but none came.

"Listen, heavenborn!" pursued the Korean eagerly. "You are a brave man and clever. I hear you are ill-will as I say. Now, I have learned why you are here and why the other foreign devil, who is also a merchant, is here. Indeed, he was inquiring for some one to take him tonight to the house of Tung Ho and Tung Fui, and I said nothing about knowing the way thither."

Haney said nothing, either, for he was somewhat astonished at all this. In the tone of the Korean was a respectful admiration, combined with a cunning twist of words.

"Now, excellency," continued the man, "I know those brethren well; indeed, I came past their place only yesterday. It is true that they are bandits and men of no reputation. None among these Chinese would willingly go to their place after dark, but I am no son of Han, heavenborn."

"What do you want with me?" snapped Haney somewhat testily.

The Korean chuckled in crafty mirth. "The Korean cackled in crafty mirth. The other foreign devil offered ten silver liang to any one who would take him to the house of Tung Ho and Tung Fui. Therefore, I said to myself, he and the other foreign devil are running a race. They are merchants. Tung Ho has something that they wish to buy, and each of them wishes to get there ahead of the other. Is this so, heavenborn?"

"If it is," said Haney, "what business is it of yours?"

"My business is to make money," and the Korean laughed again. "If one foreign devil offers ten silver liang, how much will the other offer? Now, heavenborn, I can still go to the other man and tell him I will take him."

"What about the tigers?" asked Haney.

"Bah! I am no mountain fool! I have two mules, and if you wish to go with me we can get to the place at night, and he scorned the thought of the peddler trying to kill him. The fellow's story rang true enough."

Here was the chance to beat Benson. Haney knew that he could get to the place before daylight. "The moon will rise in an hour," put in the Korean craftily.

Haney nodded. After all, this looked like a providential chance to get ahead of Benson. It mattered not that the Tung brethren were bandits. That was to be expected.

"Very well," said Haney with decision. "You are sure that you know the way?"

The Korean laughed scornfully. "Know it, heavenborn! I know every inch of these hills. Besides, the road is excellent and deeply worn."

"In that case," said Haney, "I will offer you 25 liang—not in silver, for I have none, but in notes of the Cheng-tu government. You know that they are good."

"None better, heavenborn. The price is sufficient."

"How soon can you start?"

"I can start at once, heavenborn. I have two mules, and if you wish to go with me we can get to the place at night, and he scorned the thought of the peddler trying to kill him. The fellow's story rang true enough."

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